

The Uintah County Library Regional History Center has collected hundreds of oral histories from county residents over the past three decades. The following are excerpts from interviews with Briant Stringham about his family's involvement in the sheep industry, a major economic force early in the 1900s. Stringham includes his account of the 1920 killing of John Durnell, a shepherd.

Prompted by questions from interviewers, informants tell their own stories, which we include in this debut of *In Their Own Words*.

Interviewer: What was it like in the sheep business when you first got started?

Bry Stringham: When I first got started on this lease I took from my father, we then paid \$30 and \$40 per month or a herder, now it's \$700. But men were reliable then, they'd go out and stay sometimes a full year without coming in. Then the law was not restrictive, you could leave a man alone any amount of time. Now you can't, you are supposed to have two at camp, not leave a man alone anymore like it was. Sometimes a man would be up there a month and not see anybody up in the hills.

You paid a man then \$30 a month with prunes. If you furnished the prunes, they only got \$30 a month. If [the herder] didn't demand prunes, [he] got \$35 a month. So, that might be a partial joke, but that's the story of it. You see, wages were very low, but these men were strange herders in those days. They would come in even if they had been out for a year, some of 'em, in a week they'd be broke. We had five saloons then here in Vernal. Many more saloons than grocery stores.

Interviewer: Did you go up on the mountain and stay yourself?

Bry: Yes, I stayed until I got a start. I stayed pretty well out with the sheep. We had to get started, you know, start from scratch. Finally, you gain and get a pretty good set-up and you're just the boss, and you don't ever herd anymore after it gets started.ⁱ

Interviewer: Did your father have any other business or was he into livestock?

Bry Stringham: My father was a farmer for many years. He went into cattle first, on a small scale, but the cattle thieves were so prevalent, sly and vicious, that they would steal the cattle and take them out of the country. So, he went into the sheep business. Traded the cattle for sheep, on a small scale, went into the sheep business, which were watched daily. From there he developed quite a large herd. My brother, Phil, who was older, went in with him, and the two of them had 3,000 head at the time they turned them over to my brother and myself, on a lease basis, after we were married. It was there I started my sheep life. That was in 1916.

Interviewer: You said you had trouble with cattle thieves. Were they like outlaws from Brown's Park that would come over and steal your cattle or were they just people passing through?

Bry: They were outlaws from the Brown's Park area. That's how they made their living.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of that going on?

Bry: There was a lot of it going on. You had to watch carefully or you would lose your stock.

Interviewer: How old were you when you first herded sheep?

Bry: Well, when I really herded them by myself, I took over a hundred old ewes [from my father]. I herded them from the farm, west in Little Basin. The farm was contiguous to the public domain now. I would take them up every morning and bring them back every night to the ranch. I was around eight years old, I guess. I was born with them.

Interviewer: Did you ever have to raise bum lambs?

Bry: Many of them; that's how I got my start, was bum lambs.

Interviewer: Tell me about the end of the sheep and cattlemen war?

Bry: Well, when I really started in the business for earnest in 1917, I spent one winter around the valley, then I saw, that's no good, it's wore out. That's where we all started, west of the valley and between here and Lapoint. So, I started going out across White River and as I got out farther in 1918-1919, I run out around Powder Wash and south of Blue Mountain on the Colorado line. Right on the Colorado line.

[Willard] William's hands was crossing the Colorado line going in, kinda sneaking in on the cow country. I say sneaking in, they just went in. It was understood that we wouldn't cross the line with sheep. Gentlemen's agreement, I presume. I never made one of those, but I knew they existed somewhere.

Well, they went in quite a ways that winter, then the next winter, I went in with them. We went in as far as Skull Creek. We had a fellow with us by the name of John Durnell, Williams did. He rode on the outside of the wagon, on the front canvas. The farther we are from Vernal, the closer we are to Craig. Of course, that was tine, but he shouldn't have done that. Anyhow, we went and got through that spring all right and came back out, but they notified us to never come again. Williams never did, but I went back in the next year.

Willard Williams owned two nice bands of sheep then. His sons were running them. Ira was running them at that time. Well, I went back with my outfit, two herds, back in. I shouldn't have said alone. There was one other outfit and that was Snell Johnson; he was just coming into the business and didn't know the business. Quite careless, we're all quite careless if we don't know the business.

We got as far as Red Wash, Colorado, we got that far. He with one herd and me with two. It was in February; I don't remember just what day in 1918. I decided to go out to camp. I could go out in the car from here and stay overnight. I stayed overnight with Joe Hicks, he was herding for me just off the highway a ways, you could see the camp. I had another camp farther back with a Hammer to it, Hammer and his wife. Snell Johnson was just over the ridge from me with these two boys. One young boy from Colorado and Bill Mann. Those two boys were in camp. We didn't have horses, at least they didn't. Snell didn't furnish horses, they herded them afoot. During the night seven men passed right in front of my camp in the mud, in February, You could tell how many there was because it was muddy, and went on over the ridge to Snell Johnson's herd and rode up to camp and said, "Get out of there, you sons-a-bitches!" The wagon in the night, see, and the boys, of course, jumped out. They tied them to a cedar nearby and threw coal oil over the wagon. You know, in those days we carried five gallons of coal oil, always on the north side of the wagon. Then [they] proceeded to kill the sheep. These were cattlemen. They had guns and clubs, hootin's, so the boys said. They killed about three hundred as near as they could tell. Then, of course, they disappeared.

As I went to my car I looked back over the flat and here come a person afoot. So I waited 'til he got to me and it was this Craig boy. I don't know his name and he told me the story. I said, "Well, jump in and we'll go get Snell." Went and told Snell and three days after, Snell came out. This Bill Mann stayed at my camp with Joe Hicks those three days. It was longer than that 'til they got a camp outfit out there for Johnson's. As soon as Johnson got out there with his camp, he pulled right back. We stayed there until we wanted to come back to lamb, foolish as it was. They told these boys to tell STringham he will get the same dose if he don't get out of here. But being young and foolish, I thought, what the heck. So we stayed until we lambled. They never bothered [us] and we [were] back the next fall and that's when the real trouble started.

We went clear through the winter into spring. We were camped down at Stinkin Water. I had hired John Durnell, a big husky fellow that knew part of these [seven] men. He was an expert

shot with a six-shooter. He had a long six-shooter. A big husky guy. He was the one that wrote the sign: "The further we are from Vernal, the closer we are to Craig." They notified me when we were in the middle of lambing: they're coming, they're coming tonight. I got a notification from the cowboys.

I went down to tell John 'cause I knew John was the one they'd be after. I went down to Stinkin Water, down in the oil well basin. Stinkin Water runs down there. I told John, he was alone in the tent, I said, "John, they're coming tonight. They've notified me." He said, "Send the sons-a-bitches to me!" Well, we went back and we still lambled there just the same. He just kept lambing. We couldn't move in the middle of lambing.

I remember Chick Hardy was up to the north camp, Willard Rasmussen and all that group; they were all scared, and I was, too. We kept staying. Well, spring came, as I said, we were lambing. One day the commissioners and the sheriff from Moffat County came to camp and said, "Listen, you get out of here; We've passed a law now. Not one sheep is allowed in Moffat County." I say that's a strange law, but I can't move, I'm in the middle of lambing. I said, "I can probably clean up pretty well in ten days." "We'll give you ten days."

The next day I went down to tell the fellows in Garfield County the story and they came there, to Garfield County, the commissioners and sheriff, to tell me the same story. They said, "All right, we'll give you ten days." So, in ten days I pulled out, although I had quite a loss because I wasn't quite through lambing.

When I got to Green River, John Durnell said, "Well, Bry, I think I'll stay here. I won't go farther with you. I'll go back to my wife." He married one of Old Man Price's daughters and they had a little baby girl. He went back and I replaced him.

Bill Bascom and Heber Powell came along with this combination of biddy herd of mine and they went on Blue. They went up on Moosehead, they called it. It's the high point you see on Blue Mountain. Put their camp down. Old Man Price, the father-in-law, was his camp mover. He was a big Swede, a great big Swede, but he was old. They camped for the night and in the night he bells rattled. John got up in his underwear. He had a tent there, they just put a tent up for the night. He walked out to look at the sheep and they shot him right in the belly with a .30-30, John Durnell, in the moonlight. 'Course he fell right there. He never moved from where he was, but did say to the old man to bring him a drink of water, I'm hurt. Price brought some water and gave him a drink of water. He said, "Go for help 'cause I'm hurt badly." That's the last.

Price went down and notified the sheriff. The sheriff wouldn't come, nobody from Colorado would come because, you know, that wouldn't be a popular thing to have done. So, they got Lafe Richardson [Uintah County sheriff] to come from here. He went and got the body and brought it in here.

As time went on, I still went back there. I never quit. We arrested seven of them. The Division of Investigation came in when Moffat County refused. They arrested these seven on intimidating dry farmers because of Old Man Price being in on it. Arrested these seven and took them to Grand Junction. Jim Nick was one of the witnesses. They tried them there for two weeks and couldn't ever put the spot on the man that pulled the trigger. They could never prove it, but we all pretty well knew. He was known all over as Skull Creek Jones, an old man, quite an old fellow. I didn't ever take my sheep back there. ... So, that's the story of the last killing of a sheepherder or cowboy in the history of the cattle-sheep wars. That's John Durnell.ⁱⁱ

ⁱBriant Stringham oral history, Uintah County Library Regional History Center, Folder 449.

ⁱⁱBriant Stringham oral history, #201, 18 August 1980, interviewed by Daun Huber, Uintah County Library Regional History Center, Folder 449.